Chapter 3

**SoftAssertions:**
A Progressive Paradigm for Urban Cultural Heritage, Interior Urbanism, and Interior Design

Peter A. Di Sabatino
Politecnico di Milano, Italy

**ABSTRACT**

*This Chapter glances at the shifting landscape of disciplines and professions, with particular focus towards “Interior Design.” In spite of trends and increasing examples of the erosion and overlapping of disciplinary and professional boundaries, ironically or not, there remains the need for some sort of definition; in other words, there needs to be a body of knowledge and skills defined and practiced. This is especially relevant in a world of inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary work and comprehensive creative practices. After a very quick look at “Environmental Design” – or the design of environments and experiences – the paper spends a bit more time examining possible core aspects of Interior Design while promoting its expanded field. An articulated interior urbanism creates clear areas of contribution from the interior designers within the city. Additionally, the chapter explores the curricular use of intensive design workshops with a singular focus of the student’s attention; selected student work from Politecnico di Milano is included.*

**FOUNDATION AND INTRODUCTION**

*All That Is Solid Melts into Air*

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1848, *Communist Manifesto*

The second decade of the twenty-first century continues to see the questioning of definitions and boundaries. In the realm of design, this questioning typically manifests in the erosion or erasure of strict disciplinary and professional domains. Additionally, collaboration amongst disciplines and professions has become common practice. Multidisciplinary practices are more the norm, especially at the global scale, with the
offering of comprehensive design services and extensive design and technical muscle. This combination of depth and breadth are considered to be a strong asset, if not a simple requirement in much of the creative practices of today. Along with comprehensive practices and/or highly collaborative situations, we also find the co-opting of once distinct academic and professional boundaries. We see disciplinary collisions and leap-frogging in the worlds of practice and education. The extent of creative practices that have a full array of collaborating disciplines, inclusive of art, foster not only multidisciplinary practice and education, but also the emergence of true transdisciplinary work. Education, disciplines, and creative practice are dynamic things, and must remain relevant and responsive to place and time.

Of course, the combining of art and design, and multidisciplinary processes and work, is hardly new; however, the extent and more normative nature of this type of creative practice and education may now be at unprecedented levels. Certain programs and “disciplines” in education have fundamentally included multidisciplinarity in their very foundation and formation. An example of such a program can be found in the “Environmental Design” degree at Art Center College of Design. Around 2002, while the Chair of the department, I led the writing of following descriptive text concerning the department, its degree, and place in the world (Note A):

The Emerging Practice (and new discipline) of Environmental Design

The Department of Environmental Design at Art Center College of Design works within a spectrum inclusive of furniture, furnishings, interiors, buildings, landscapes and urbanism, while also engaging environmental art, environmental graphics and digital environments. We explore and practice anything that constitutes an environment /experience: be it for living, working or playing, be it small, medium or large. The Department seeks to foster the appreciation and ability to recognize, enhance and create beauty and meaning in not only the built environment, but also in “non-built” environments and experiences. With the students, we research, practice and explore the full spectrum of Environmental Design in an experimental and creative atmosphere with simultaneity, multiplicity, significance and responsibility at the core. We consciously disregard traditional disciplinary boundaries and divisions, choosing a dynamic, multiple and comprehensive approach to design. We strive for unity, not division. Our students exhibit the ability to fluidly and fluently navigate through scales and types in design.

We embrace the emerging/maturing discipline and practice of Environment and Experience Design. We will see a way to navigate the 21st Century.

The reference to a “new discipline” above may be an interesting thread to explore briefly here. We were faced with, or perhaps more accurately, we choose to face the academic and professional situation as a new discipline and an emerging practice. For example, when entering the department as its new Chair, the “History of Architecture” was still being taught as a required course in the curriculum for the degree, yet the program was intentionally not a degree program in architecture. The program was articulated at the time as being about the grey areas, and being situated in-between normative disciplinary and professional domains. Therefore, it seemed a bit odd, and not too satisfying or appropriate, to be teaching an explicit history of a single and well established discipline. So we hired a few of the younger and brighter historians in the Los Angeles area to create a history and theory sequence on “Environmental Design” – or a body of knowledge about the design of environments and experiences. They were encouraged, as other disciplines and professions have done (especially in their formative years) to create and co-op material as needed while creating the story, the history, of the discipline. An articulated body
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